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TELEGRAM

January 07, 2004

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Subject: A SENIOR EMIRATI ON POLITICAL REFORM, IRAQ AND MBZ
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000095

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/14
TAGS: PREL PGOV TC
SUBJECT: A SENIOR EMIRATI ON POLITICAL REFORM, IRAQ AND
MBZ APPOINTMENT

¶11. (U) Classified by Ambassador Marcelle M. Wahba, for
reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶12. (C) Summary and Comment: The Ambassador met one-on-one with Mohamed Habroush Al Suwaidi, chairman of the National Bank of Abu Dhabi, to discuss the current situation in Iraq, the recent appointment of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed to the post of Abu Dhabi Deputy Crown Prince and the prospects for increased political participation in the UAE. Habroush holds several senior positions and plays a key role in charting the financial future of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. He is a senior and highly influential member of Abu Dhabi's Supreme Petroleum Council and the Abu Dhabi Executive Council. Habroush is one of the small handful of educated Emiratis who returned from abroad to work alongside Sheikh Zayed to establish the UAE federation in the 1970's. From

the start Habroush was put in charge of finance and served as chairman of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority from 1987 to 1996. A close confidant of the Abu Dhabi ruling family, Habroush also serves as advisor and mentor to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Khalifa bin Zayed. He maintains an extremely low public profile but has always readily agreed to meet with the Ambassador and last summer played a helpful role in resolving the problem with the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-up. Habroush's comments on succession and political reform in the UAE are significant given his background and close ties with the ruling family. His liberal outlook and pro-west leanings probably reflect the views of many of the senior leaders of Abu Dhabi who worked hand in hand with Shaykh Zayed to establish a federation based on consensus and a philosophy of tolerance and acceptance.

Checks and balances key to future Iraqi stability

¶13. (C) The conversation quickly turned to Iraq where Habroush spent a number of years, pre-Saddam era, attending Baghdad University. Habroush believes that with Saddam's capture violence will eventually subside and resistance diminish. Sunnis are clearly angered by turn of events and the USG made some early mistakes that added to Sunni discontent - he pointed to disbanding the army as the most serious strategic error. In response to the Ambassador's brief on next steps leading up to the transition from CPA to a Iraqi interim government, he said our effort to reach out to Sunni leadership is a good strategy to achieving long term stability and should be intensified. Given the 35 years of rule by Saddam, he was not sure how much power Sunni tribal leaders continue to exercise. Right now the only options within the Sunni community are tribal leaders or clerics - and of the two groups he believes tribal leaders remain the more influential. Habroush said he read reports on the USG's plan to organize the Iraqi Military with 40% Shia, 30% Sunni and 30% Kurdish. In his view this is a well balanced combination that will not allow any one group to have unchecked powers. Habroush commented that we should base the political process on the same ratios. The curse of Saddam's reign was the fact that the Sunni/Baathist regime was omnipotent without any checks or balances from other power centers of Iraqi society. Habroush said the key to a stable future in Iraq is to make sure that the major ethnic/religious groups all have healthy representation so that no one group can act alone.

Appointment of MbZ to Deputy CP the right move

¶14. (C) Habroush, who is a close friend and mentor to the CP and with close ties to Shaykh Sultan bin Zayed, was very positive on the appointment of Shaykh Mohamed bin Zayed (MbZ) to the post of Deputy CP. (Note: During the controversy with the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow up, Habroush was the Crown Prince's emissary to his younger half brother, who ran the Center. End Note) Haborush told the Ambassador that this appointment was in the works for a long time. MbZ has been playing the role of Deputy CP to Shaykh Khalifa for several years and now it has been formalized. MbZ is capable, hard working and a natural leader he said. Shaykh Zayed, by making this appointment, has helped alleviate all the speculation and has ensured a stable succession. Habroush added that MbZ is a very popular figure in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, the UAE, and the region so it was well received and everyone's reaction has been positive. He pointed to MbZ's many accomplishments including taking the lead in forging ties with the US, with France and the UK - all important relationships for the UAE. CP Khalifa is very happy with the decision Habroush said "and even the brother most affected by this appointment, Sultan bin Zayed, welcomed and accepted the decision."

Time to open up political participation in the UAE

¶5. (C) The Ambassador raised the subject of democratization that she had first discussed with Habroush several months ago. As he did the first time, Habroush told the Ambassador that he believes this is the right time for the leadership to make the decision to allow their citizens to participate in running the country and sharing the responsibility. It is better to give them that right rather than wait to have them take it or demand it. UAE nationals are well educated, content with their socio-economic situation and very supportive of their political leadership - why not give them a substantive role? Habroush noted that in some ways the UAE has regressed in this area because in the past "we enjoyed a more open and democratic process through planning and municipal councils that played an active role in decision making - in terms of how to spend resources and developmental priorities." He added that along with increased political participation there is a need to have a more transparent fiscal policy where the "lines are clear between the private purse and the public purse. This is very important and I am concerned those lines are getting more blurred rather than more transparent."

UAE Political Leadership not ready to make decisions

¶6. (C) In response to the Ambassador's query if these issues are being seriously discussed for imminent implementation, Habroush said that while there is some discussion in the inner circles, few are ready to take the next step of actually making a decision and implementing it. In Dubai an announcement was made for elected Municipal councils but there has been no effort whatsoever to implement that decision. "It would be easy, he said, to create municipal councils that are a mixture of elected and appointed officials like Qatar or Oman but we must give them a mandate - a substantive role in determining local community life." Habroush said in the UAE many in the political leadership argue that since everything is working well there is no need for a change that may bring about undesirable consequences as in Kuwait where Islamists have a strong voice. "They don't understand, he said, that this is the right time to make the change - before we have any serious discontent within our society."

Before or after Zayed?

¶7. (C) The Ambassador pointed to recent political openings in Bahrain, Qatar and Oman and wondered if the hesitation in the UAE is due to the age of the President who may not wish to tackle an issue which will require some heavy lifting with the conservative tribal leaders of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and the Northern Emirates. Habroush conceded that while it will take some work, it would be more easily accepted by all Emiratis if done by Shaykh Zayed than anyone else. Shaykh Zayed has always been ahead of his time and more liberal than most people around him he said. If the issue is raised with him he will support it. In earlier conversations with the Ambassador both Shaykh Mohamed bin Zayed and Hamdan bin Zayed have insinuated that this is too sensitive and difficult an issue to raise with Shaykh Zayed due to the state of his health and advanced age but both were firmly committed to democratic reform.